

# ADDRESS

TO THE

PEOPLE OF THE CITY OF NEW-YORK

BY THE

CITIZENS' ASSOCIATION

OF NEW-YORK.

ADOPTED AT A GENERAL MEETING HELD MAY 9th, 1871.

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THE AMENDMENTS TO THE CITY CHARTER—  
THE TWO PER CENT. ACT—THE DEBT.

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NEW-YORK :

PUBLISHED BY THE ASSOCIATION.  
MAY, 1871

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# THE GOVERNMENT OF NEW-YORK.

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## THE AMENDMENTS TO THE CHARTER—THE TWO PER CENT. ACT—THE DEBT.

The following address was adopted at a meeting of the Citizens' Association, held May 9th, 1871, at 813 Broadway :

CITIZENS' ASSOCIATION OF NEW-YORK, }  
May 9, 1871. }

*To the Citizens of New-York:*

The Citizens' Association presents the following analysis of the more important acts affecting the government of the City and County of New York, passed at the last session of the Legislature. These provisions of law may be divided into three classes:

*First*—Those which affect the organic structure or the administration of our government.

*Second*—Those which provide for current expenditure from annual revenues.

*Third*—Those which provide for an increase of our permanent debt.

Of the laws of the first class those affecting our elections seem to the Association unwise.

## THE ELECTION LAWS.

The election law of 1870, passed by an almost unanimous vote of both political parties, provided

such safeguards against illegal registration and fraudulent voting as experience had shown to be necessary. No complaints have been made of hardship or injustice in the operation of the law. The new act, by directing the registration of voters upon the Saturday before election, and the reception of the votes of those who do not register, has thrown open the door to the frauds which have so often disgraced our elections and practically disfranchised our honest citizens.

The Association presented petitions to the Legislature and a remonstrance to the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Cities asking that this bill might not pass.

#### AMENDMENTS TO THE CHARTER.

The amendments to the City Charter are, as the Association believes, in the main in the interest of good government. Almost all of them tend to the consolidation of power and concentration of responsibility, which were among the chief merits of the charter of 1870. The reduction of the number of corporation papers from seventy-six to nineteen is a necessary measure of economy. The provisions contained in the tax levy of 1870, authorizing the Mayor to appoint the Comptroller and Corporation Counsel, are embodied in the charter. Specially authorized deputies of the Comptroller and the Commissioner of Public Works are empowered to discharge the duties of those officers in their absence. The powers of the Department of Docks are confirmed and extended. The authority of the Commissioners of the Sinking

Fund to sell the market property of the city is renewed and defined. It is made the duty of the Comptroller to make to the Mayor a quarterly report of all disbursements made by him. A bureau for the removal of incumbrances, and a bureau of railroads and ferries in the Department of Public Works are established. The powers of the existing Board of Street Opening and Improvement are extended to the whole city south of Fifty-ninth Street.

By amendment of the charter, and appointment by the Mayor the public schools have been intrusted for five years to the Commissioners who for two years past have controlled them. The present board contains members of both political parties, and of six great religious denominations. It has been zealous, economical and efficient. Our system of public education has never been more thorough and successful than under its management.

The trustees and inspectors of schools are hereafter to be appointed by the Mayor. These important trusts cannot safely be confided to men who have no better qualifications than success in local politics.

These changes complete the abandonment of the unfortunate policy introduced throughout our State in 1846 of shortening terms of office, and intrusting the election of all officers immediately to the people. Nowhere has it failed so entirely as in this city. The Legislature has from time to time, by acts creating metropolitan commissions and municipal departments, endeavored to give to different branches of the city government the stability and independence which

under the elective system were unattainable. The result was a government heterogeneous, costly, and efficient only in a portion of its work. Under the new system a mayor elected for two years is endowed with the fullest power for good government. If there be waste, dishonesty, or inefficiency anywhere in our municipal administration the Mayor must bear the blame. Those who have found it impossible to choose intelligently among the crowd of unknown candidates for charter offices, or to hold them when chosen to any real responsibility, have now to select a single steward and to hold him to a strict account. To our citizens of this generation this system is an experiment; but it is tried only when other methods have failed.

#### TWO PER CENT. ACT.

The most important measure of the session is the act known as the two per cent. tax levy. By it four officers, the Mayor, Comptroller, the President of the Department of Public Parks, and the Commissioner of Public Works, are directed to meet as a board of apportionment and make the appropriations for all departments and purposes of the City and County Governments, and the Supervisors are directed to raise by taxation the sum so appropriated. By the bill as originally introduced, the total amount of the appropriations, together with the portion of the State tax borne by the city, and the interest and principal of the city and county debt, falling due within the year, was limited to 2 per cent. of the value of the

estates liable to taxation, as assessed for the year 1871. The rate of taxation was thus greatly reduced, and the city revenue fixed at an amount barely sufficient to defray the expense of government. Before the act was passed, however, it was ascertained that the proportion of State tax to be borne by the city was greatly increased, and the bill was amended by adding to the amount which the Supervisors were authorized to raise, the excess of the State tax for 1871 over that for 1870, amounting to something less than \$2,000,000.

No measure of such merit has been more misrepresented and more unfairly discussed. To the attacks of those who were interested in perpetuating extravagance and dishonesty was added opposition from very respectable quarters. The Association, believing that the bill was the best which could under the circumstances be passed, strenuously advocated it. Petitions in its favor were presented to the Legislature, and in the daily press the Association explained the measure and discussed its effects. With those who opposed the bill without reading it, who attacked it one day because the word "now" appeared in one of its clauses, and denounced it the next, because the word "now" was stricken out, no argument was possible. But to every honest objection the association presented an answer. To those who opposed the bill because it gave to executive officers the power of fixing the amount of taxation, it was answered that, in this respect, there was no change in the present system; that the Legislature had year by year conferred

on different local boards, composed of executive officers, the power to make provision for the annual expenses of the City and County Government, and that the annual tax levy, while providing for only a few necessary purposes, had become a vehicle for needless appropriations, burdensome to the City, and corrupting to the Legislature. To those who feared that the bill would give to the officers named in it too great power to increase the burdens of taxation, the Association pointed out that these officers belonged to and controlled five boards, in each of which they had unchecked authority to appropriate money, while they shared with others the responsibility for extravagance, that the two per Cent. Bill limited the existing power of expenditure, and conferred only the power of economy. To those who argued that the basis upon which the taxes were to be calculated was liable to change, the Association pointed out that under the law and the practice of the Department of Taxes and Assessments, the maximum basis of taxation would be settled before the Bill could become a law. To all the Association showed that the limit fixed was a reasonable one, and that in the passage of some such measure and the creation of some body clothed with full and general power of retrenchment, and acting under full responsibility, lay the only hope of escape from the most demoralizing forms of extravagance, the profligate expenditure in printing and supplies, the employment of useless laborers, and the creation and perpetuation of sinecure offices; and finally, that the immediate effects of the measure would be a saving to

the City of more than \$6,000,000 a year, and to every tax-payer of a fifth part of his taxes. While some provisions recommended by the Association were not adopted, every change actually made by the Two Per Cent. Bill was an improvement upon the system previously existing.

#### CITY BONDS.

With regard to the laws authorizing the issue of bonds, the Association desires to express its belief that the five following appropriations, which it has steadily opposed, were unwise and improper:

*First*—The appropriation of \$600,000 for the new court-houses in the Third and Ninth Judicial Districts.

These structures have already cost \$100,000 each without reckoning the value of their sites. The City cannot afford to make such enormous outlay to provide accommodations for every District Court.

*Second*—\$750,000 for completing the County Court-house. No more money should be spent in gilding and decorating this monument of corruption and extravagance.

*Third*—For the Fire Alarm Telegraph, \$400,000.

In 1870 \$400,000 was directed to be paid for this telegraph, the contract price for which was \$426,450. If there are any facts which make this further expenditure reasonable and honest, they have not been given to the public.

*Fourth*—For payment of the claims of ex-Sheriff O'Brien.

Without referring to the validity of these claims, which are to be audited by the Corporation Counsel, it is enough to say that they arise from services rendered to the City during Mr. O'Brien's term of office as Sheriff.

On principle, current expenses should not be paid by the issue of bonds,

*Fifth*—For the establishment of a parade ground, \$450,000.

In view of the fact that one-tenth of our island is already devoted to public places, it seems wholly unnecessary to make further expenditure for these purposes.

The provision of \$3,000,000 for the improvement of the parks and the erection of museums is large, but if the money be as judiciously expended as the greater part of that previously appropriated for similar purposes, the community will have no reason to complain. The necessity for developing the water supply of the City has long been felt. The limit of expenditure for this purpose which was originally \$5,000,000, was, on the representations of the Association, reduced by the Legislature to \$1,000,000. It is hoped that a smaller amount may be sufficient. The appropriation of \$1,300,000 for new Croton mains seems not to be excessive in view of the increased wants of our city. The appropriation of \$580,000 for new school buildings is reasonable and proper.

## THE VIADUCT RAILROAD.

The Act creating the Viaduct Railroad Company and authorizing the City to contribute to it \$5,000,-000 does not, in the opinion of the Association, furnish sufficient guarantees for the protection of the City in its investment or for the building of the road. The defects in the law will doubtless be supplied by the local authorities. The public money should be so given as to stimulate and not check private enterprise; and the City should have abundant assurance that the great work is to be honestly and rapidly prosecuted. The appropriation to provide accommodation for patients suffering from contagious diseases is a necessary one.

It is to be remembered that these provisions of law are permissive and not mandatory, and in view of this fact one of the sections of the Two Per Cent. Act has an especial importance. It provides that no bonds except those issued by the Commissioners of the Sinking Fund shall be issued without the authority and concurrence of the members of the Board of Apportionment in addition to all other authority required by law. For every increase of the City debt each member of this Board is thus made directly responsible, and the public have a right to expect that these officers will refuse their sanction to the unwise and extravagant expenditure which the Legislature, necessarily less acquainted with the wants of the City, has authorized.

The Governor's veto of the Bill directing the ap-

pointment of civil justices' clerks, prevented a useless expenditure of \$45,000 a year.

The passage of the Act relating to the Broadway widening, and the setting aside by the Supreme Court of the report of the Commissioners in that matter, have saved the City several millions of dollars.

In the present condition of most of the Executive departments of our local Government, in the simplification of our municipal system, and in the deep and general interest which is felt in the affairs of our City, the Association sees the most convincing proof of the success of the efforts for reform, which have been made in the last ten years, and the best ground of hope for the future.



